

Number of deaths counted from Texas blackout catastrophe approaches 200

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The recorded death toll from Winter Storm Uri in Texas continues to rise as more information on the full scale of human suffering comes out. A recent *Houston Chronicle* analysis linked 194 deaths to the February storm according, making it one of the worst natural disasters in the state in the last 100 years. The toll is almost three times the direct fatalities resulting from Hurricane Harvey in 2017 which at the time was the deadliest storm to hit Texas since 1919.

The official count is still ongoing with additional deaths already linked to the storm. The state's death rate, which was already higher than normal due to the COVID-19 pandemic, was 8 percent above the already high level during the week of the blackouts.

Of the deaths already recorded, more than half were from hypothermia, 22 from medical devices failing or a lack of medical care because of the weather, and 16 from carbon monoxide and the same number from other causes such as fires and wrecks, while 40 were attributed to the storm by authorities without a cause. Half of the deaths were among the elderly.

Two dozen lawsuits have been filed against the Electric Reliability Council of Texas by families whose family members died, alleging wrongful death due to failures by the state's power grid operator, with some of the lawsuits also naming Texas energy companies such as NRG Energy, Oncor, CenterPoint Energy, and CPS Energy. The disastrous blackout was caused by the profit seeking of the power companies, the unplanned and disorganized nature inherent to the private ownership of electrical production, and the Texas government's failure to plan in any substantial way for the impact of winter weather.

The counting of the deaths from the storm has been hampered by the state's death certification system, which lacks a public database as well as a sufficient

number of medical examiners for investigating untimely deaths and instead mostly relies on justices of the peace with some training but rarely a medical background. Only 14 counties out of the 254 in Texas have examiners to investigate untimely deaths, and the release of information is subject to the whim of local officials.

Dr. Corinne Stern, the Webb County medical examiner told the *Houston Chronicle*, "I had a 93-year-old who died in his home. If his electricity had not been turned off in those rolling blackouts, chances are he'd be alive today" and that "These deaths were preventable, and they're senseless. They shouldn't have happened."

The Texas Department of State Health Services only lists 125 deaths at the time of writing from the winter storm, with questions being raised that the state may be downplaying the number of deaths by making the criteria for a storm-related death too strict.

During the storm, many of the elderly, disabled, and others with medical conditions were unable to access lifesaving medication and treatment that would have been accessible with power and access to hospitals and clinics, many of which were without water as a result of power outages and rendered inaccessible due to the storm and the state's failure to adequately clear the roads of ice and snow.

Texas power companies have special designations available for vulnerable people, i.e. customers either with or taking care of people with health conditions that require electricity, which requires that customers fill out a form and send it to a doctor for approval and then send to the power company. Under Texas state rules, power companies must provide power to critical and chronic care customers only "if reasonably possible," that is if it does not get in the way of profit making.

Olivia Esparza, who was caring for her daughter Diana who has Rett syndrome and is unable to speak or move, and requires electricity for machines to help her breathe and evacuate saliva while sleeping, experienced a power shutoff without warning despite having filed paperwork with CenterPoint Energy to be on the Critical Care Registry. Esparza, after reserving a hotel room which also turned out to be without power, was forced to leave the state with her daughter.

CenterPoint stated in an email to the *Houston Chronicle* that power for residents with critical care designations could be interrupted “unexpectedly.” The power companies, as well as the Texas Public Utilities Commission (PUC), affirm this with a PUC disclaimer on the application for the Critical Care Registry reading “If electricity is a necessity, you must make other arrangements for on-site back-up capabilities or other alternatives in the event of loss of electric service.”

According to a survey of 600 disabled people living in Texas by Disability Rights Texas, most disabled people lost power and water for 24 hours or longer, with 75 and 80 percent losing power and water respectively, while many lost both for a period of 4 days or longer. Only 6 percent of respondents were signed up for a Critical Care Registry or with the State of Texas Emergency Assistance Registry (STEAR) with more than half having never heard of either. Additionally, of the less than half who were signed up for emergency alerts, most found them inaccessible.

Responses to the survey also documented the hardships by many in the storm, with one respondent stating “It was dangerous and painful. I’m disabled and have 3 children living with me with disabilities. It was 12 degrees with no way to warm up. Food got spoiled, my insulin was not good. Power got restored around me but my power was out for 6 days. Why?? It was not fair the way they restored service. Some neighborhoods did not [lose] power at all.”



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